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ABSTRACT

An adult immersion program in the Mohawk language took place in an Iroquois community in southern Ontario. The class was limited to 12 students who had taken a readiness course that introduced them to basic grammar and vocabulary. The class met daily in the relaxed setting of a house. The preparation and sharing of meals, the presence of fluent speakers, occasional group outings, and the use of materials such as pictures and word cards created a conversational context. The students retained less from the readiness course than anticipated, resulting in more time spent explaining simple grammar points than was expected. Students also kept asking for translations and explanations in English. This was counterproductive because they were not learning to listen, and instructors were forced to think and speak in English more than in Mohawk. Students who did best were those who had rich English usage and considerable academic background. However, knowledge of English interfered with learning Mohawk because of different underlying assumptions about relationships and time and space that made interpreting out of context difficult. Also, English relies on particles, whereas Mohawk relies on a large vocabulary. Speaking a language does not qualify one to teach it. Teachers who have learned the language as a second language themselves often recognize difficulties in learning the language that fluent speakers are unaware of. Planned course improvements are discussed. (TD)

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ED 462 240

A Native Language Immersion Program for Adults
Reflections on Year 1

David Kanatawakhon Maracle, Merle Richards

In September 1999, an adult immersion program in the Mohawk language began at Six Nations, an Iroquois community in southern Ontario. Its purpose was to provide adult learners with the opportunity to learn to speak the Mohawk language with sufficient fluency to participate in traditional cultural activities in Mohawk. It was hoped that, with a strong foundation in oral language use, students would be able to further their language development through continued interaction with fluent speakers in the community. This presentation describes the program's several distinctive characteristics and its results.

What was the reason for developing an adult immersion program?

Years of regular once-a-week language classes for adults had not been successful in developing fluent speakers of Mohawk. Most students dropped out after the first few weeks, and those who remained were not developing enough oral language skills to practice further with fluent speakers in the community. The classes focused on the basics of language (i.e., how to put words together, vocabulary, etc.), but did not provide enough opportunity for active language use. An adult immersion program was developed to provide an environment where students could actually use the language they learned while further developing conversational skills and benefiting from the presence of fluent speakers.

How was the program organized?

Brian Maracle, a resident of the Six Nations Territory and a language learner himself, designed the program, building on the valuable experiences he had gained through participating in a previous experimental adult immersion course, with some changes in the structure and the methods used. He organized funding, found a house that could be used as an immersion setting, and arranged for instruction and participation by fluent speakers from the community. Limiting the group to twelve adult learners who had some previous language study was an important feature. To ensure that all the participants shared some basic knowledge, a "readiness course" introducing basic grammar and vocabulary was offered in the spring before the immersion program. The instructor, David Kanatawakhon Maracle, also served as a link between the readiness course and the immersion classes, where he was a resource person, spending time on grammar, but, more importantly, speaking the language actively all the time or as much as possible.

The term "immersion" usually implies communicative methods and situation-based talk. How were these accommodated in the program?

The group met daily in a rented house, which provided a less formal atmosphere than a classroom. The relaxed setting, the sharing of meals, and the

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presence of different Elders and speakers on different days created a conversational context. Occasional group outings and activities also provided content to discuss and review. One regular situation that involved conversation was preparing, serving, and eating lunch every day. In this situation, the fluent speakers were able to model usage and apply what had been learned in class. People took turns in the kitchen, with the fluent speakers overseeing and describing the operations. In this setting, even the shy or slower students were able to relate vocabulary and the experiential context.

Another useful tactic to generate discussion was to use pictures as the focus for talk, again providing a concrete source of meaning along with the spoken forms. Word cards, flash cards, and similar materials were available for individual or group practice and review.

What other methods of instruction were used with this group?

Contrary to our original expectations, but in response to students' questioning, the instructors ended up giving extensive grammatical explanations using a blackboard. The strategy was to provide examples by describing a situation in English and then showing the Mohawk equivalent of that particular situation, always trying to use words in an illustrative context rather than simply saying, "This translates as *X*." Full paradigms of words, especially verbs, were provided to give students the elements they needed to construct utterances.

What were the problems encountered?

The program moved rather slowly. It turned out that the students who had taken the readiness course retained less than anticipated. Some of the students appeared to be starting from day one, with little grammatical knowledge. We had expected to spend our time teaching how to manipulate the language and how to use it conversationally and to devote little time to grammar. However, a great deal of time was spent explaining simple grammar points that should have been learned in the spring course.

As well, learners had different expectations about what an adult immersion course should be. To the organizers, an immersion course implied that the classroom language would be Mohawk, with English used only when necessary for communication. But some of the students were uneasy about not understanding everything they heard; they wanted to be in an immersion course, but at the same time they wanted to know in English exactly what they were hearing in Mohawk. They, therefore, kept asking for translations and explanations in English. As a result, the instructors found themselves explaining things in English too much and not spending enough time just speaking Mohawk, describing things, and talking through activities. They were talking about the language rather than in it. The process was counterproductive for the students because they were not learning to listen and also were not trying to catch some meaning from the stream of spoken Mohawk. It was hard for the fluent speakers as well because being asked for translations all the time forced them to think and speak in English more than in Mohawk as they searched for equivalent words, thinking how one

would say in Mohawk some phrase used in English. As a result, they were not able to use the language naturally in the context of conversation.

We found, too, that, although the chalkboard lessons were effective in explaining grammar concepts, they created non-language activity at times. Some students became so engrossed in writing everything down from the chalkboard that they did not listen to the explanations or retain the pronunciations. They would then ask the instructor to say the same thing over and over again—a tedious process for their classmates. Moreover, afterwards, unless they reread and studied their notes, they were not actually learning the content. As Brian Maracle put it at one point, "If what you've written in the book were a sign of fluency, then everyone in the room would be a fluent speaker." The students were not speaking enough, and some could not even read their notes easily.

To counteract this trend of non-language activity, the instructors decided to spend more time verbalizing examples. For instance, they would pronounce examples and change the forms, changing different tenses and aspects of a verb (such as from a conditional to a future situation) to demonstrate the phonological changes and pronunciation rules that accompany certain grammatical changes. The instructor would only write the root form on the board, forcing the students to listen and think out the word forms. In future, this might be a focus for the readiness classes.

Have you observed any characteristics that seem to make language learning easier for some students than others?

Students who have considerable academic background seem to know how to study more effectively, and those who have already studied a language or are knowledgeable about English grammar have some language learning strategies that make it easier for them. People who have never seriously studied a language before often do not understand that talking about language is different from learning to use it; you can know the linguistic structures of a language without being able to speak it. At the same time, it can be helpful to explain a form that students need to acquire or to correct them and then demonstrate and practice the form. In this class, some students were continually asking questions about structures, but for those who lacked the linguistic concepts and the grammar terms, it was difficult to comprehend the explanations.

For example, English seldom requires gender markers. In English, you can say, "The boy is running," but in Mohawk, one says, "The boy he is running." Where English uses "The man saw the woman," Mohawk uses, "The man he saw her the woman." Verbs, as well as nouns and pronouns, are marked for gender, and animate verbs are marked for relationships. We found that for students who had not previously studied a language this was an extremely difficult concept; they quite literally had to alter the way in which they expressed themselves. They had to remain aware of these patterns while trying to put phrases together.

The course was most difficult for those students who had no post-secondary education. Their habitual daily language use was not highly articulate or rich in vocabulary, so it was hard for them to grasp the fundamental differences between

the two languages. Students who did best in Mohawk were those who had rich English usage. When learning Mohawk as a second language, it seemed that success was more likely if the students had a good grounding in their daily language, that is, if they had a good sense of structure, a better than average vocabulary, and the ability to use vocabulary effectively. That grounding makes it possible for students to form general concepts about language and to understand the specific differences between languages, which really helps in learning a second language. Mohawk speakers find themselves using a lot of different words because there is no "basic English" strategy of "one word fits all." In Mohawk, there usually is a specific word for any specific situation—it is just not the same situation as in English! You have to know the different ways of expressing your idea.

What were the most frequent questions asked by learners?

Most questions related to verb forms or other vocabulary. The students who wanted to say something in Mohawk would first frame the utterance in English. Then they would ask, "How do you say...?" But the two languages have different underlying assumptions about relationships and time and space that show up in the grammar and in how words are used in context. Interpreting out of context, therefore, caused real problems of understanding because if an equivalent word was given, the students assumed that that word would have the same use in Mohawk as the translated word had in English. You can learn a word in context and apply it in the proper contexts if you are shown how and taught how, but when you attach an English interpretation, learners use the English word as a model. They ask, "Well, how come we use that word here, but you can't use it there?" The Mohawk might require entirely different expressions where English would use the same word because the Mohawk context suggests different meanings. Misunderstandings often arose because the learners did not know how to frame questions that would elicit relevant meanings from the fluent speakers. For the speakers, there was no problem in their use of the language, which was intuitive and expert. But their usage was purely oral; they were never educated in their own language academically, so it was hard for them to explain it to learners or to see what their difficulties might be.

Can you explain some of the ways that knowing English makes it hard to learn another kind of language?

In our interviews, several students commented that the greatest interference with language learning came from English. One problem is the "basic English" strategy mentioned above, which allows a speaker to use a small amount of English vocabulary in many ways. For example, you have expressions like "I put on," "I put in," "I put under," "I put over," "I put away," "I put around," "I put back," "I put up" and also expressions like "I put up with." English relies heavily on particles, which means that the speaker does not really need to know a great deal of vocabulary, just the situation in which the words occur. In Mohawk, you need a different word for each one of those expressions. Similarly, in English,

you can say, "I trust him," but in Mohawk, you have several different nuances of meaning: "How do you trust him? Do you trust him with money, with what he has to say, with his behaviour, with how he is going to do something?" In English, the one word "trust" can be used in any of those contexts, but in Mohawk, each requires a different word. When this became a problem it was usually because the learners were not fully aware of the ways in which they used words in English and, therefore, expected each Mohawk word to have one meaning and one pronunciation. Even though in English they can use vocabulary flexibly or precisely and can frame meaning in many ways, they appeared unable to acknowledge the same kind of flexibility in Mohawk. Mohawk words often have different meanings in different contexts. For example, *ikehre* can mean "I want to," but it can also be "I think." Some students had a hard time trying to figure out such relationships—"Why can it mean 'I want to do something' this time and mean 'I think something' next time?" They were not noticing the grammatical marker that makes the distinction clear. For many words in Mohawk, different grammatical forms indicate different interpretations. In this case, you can say, "*Ikehre akhninon*"—"I want to buy it," but if you say, "*Ikehre tsi akhninon*," what you are saying is "I think I'll buy it." That *tsi* in there changes the interpretation. Fluent speakers know intuitively how this works, but learners have to be shown the difference.

As well, some of the students used a quite limited vocabulary in English, without much colour or variation. This appeared to affect their ability to deal with the wide range of vocabulary that exists in Mohawk. For example, trying to explain the differences between expressions like "I hear something" and "I hear that they left" became extremely difficult because the conjunction "that" is seldom used in colloquial English. Speakers just omit it. So trying to get the students to use the conjunction in Mohawk depended on making them aware of it in English as a construction that is there, but that can be deleted in speech. Moreover, students with a thin vocabulary in English sometimes found it hard to understand classroom explanations or recognize when terms were synonyms. For example, they might know "I understand" but not "I comprehend." So having been told that there is a word for every different situation in Mohawk, they looked for different Mohawk words for "understand" and "comprehend," not realizing that they have a similar meaning. In fact, you would say "*wake'nikonhrayenta's*" for both.

What was the role of fluent speakers in the program?

There always used to be people in the community who were known to be especially good speakers, whose rhetoric was admirable, who knew all the nuances of speech making, and who were considered educated in Mohawk. Nowadays, there are very few such models. It was, therefore, essential to have good speakers whose pronunciation and grammatical skills could both serve as models for the learners and strengthen the skills of the instructors.

It became clear, however, that even our most fluent speakers do not speak the language often enough to be actively engaged in the language, constantly developing it by using it in new situations. This was especially apparent in contrast with language communities where there are still many speakers. In Iroquoian

communities where the number of speakers is dwindling, we have fewer and fewer people who are truly fluent in their own language—who can quite literally talk the birds out of the trees using language alone. Many of them, when asked, "How do you say this?" can certainly tell you a way to say it, but the form that comes to mind may not be one they actively use themselves. Either the usage does not come to mind because they seldom use the language in discourse with other fluent speakers, or the way the question is asked does not elicit the context that would generate a rich answer. So they have little occasion to use the really colourful vocabulary that exists in the language, and it is therefore being lost.

Another finding was that when fluent speakers became teachers, they tended to simplify their own usage to make it easier for the learners. Rather than cultivate the richness of language, with its many ways of expressing meaning, they often used only the words that had been taught because those were the ones the learners could recognize. That was fine at the beginning of the language learning, but it did not illustrate the depths of meaning the language can convey. Conversely, the speakers also frequently used highly complex forms for which the students were not ready. Being fluent, they did not notice the grammatical structures in their own speech. This suggests that when planning language programmes involving speakers from your community, you must pay attention to the language level even of the fluent speakers.

The speakers themselves are still aware of the many ways of saying "trust" and the different words for "hear" and so on because those are part of even the most basic language use. However, speakers generally are no longer using really elaborate language forms except in ceremonies—and few people still know the traditional ceremonies—and that can affect the way they use words and grammar. Moreover, some speakers, who use English more than Mohawk, show a tendency to anglicize word organization in Mohawk when they speak. They use English sentence structure as the matrix even when they are using Mohawk words because that is the way they think in English all the time. This also creates a real gap between today's fluent speakers and the old tradition. In older times, people were acutely aware of formal versus informal usage, and most of the traditions and rituals used very formal, "elevated" language. Contemporary speakers have difficulty with the more formal language. In daily speech, for example, they use contractions and drop endings and syllables so often that they may no longer be aware of the full, formal shapes of words. As well, in communities like Six Nations and Tyendinaga, the people we call fluent speakers certainly were fluent as children or as young adults, but in the last 40, 50, or 60 years, they have spoken mostly English. As a result, their ability to express themselves in adult ways may have become stunted. They have lost part of the range of language variation they would normally have had in a language used for all aspects of daily and community life.

This kind of language depletion creates problems even among the fluent speakers themselves. Depending on how they have been using the language over the years, they may speak easily in some situations, but have great difficulty in others. For example, only a few speakers who have taken an interest in medicinal

plants still know the names and functions of those plants. That is a whole part of the culture bound up in vocabulary that is being lost, even among those who can speak the language. So those that have the knowledge may not be able to discuss it even with other fluent speakers whose expertise is different. Over time, they may forget terms or expressions peculiar to their field, and with the vocabulary goes the knowledge it encodes. Over time, their language use becomes less rich and flexible as the range of subject matter they can discuss narrows, and their expressive range becomes more superficial. It is like a palette where much of the colour has dried up.

Given this first year's experience, what changes are contemplated for the next year?

There are certain elements of grammar and language organization that need to be mastered early as a foundation for language development. For example, the students should become aware very quickly of constructions of tense and aspect, such as *is*, *was*, *will be*, and *would be*, and *do*, *did*, and *have done*. Key words, like *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, *always*, *sometimes*, and *used to* can serve as cues to those constructions. It is also important for students to learn pronominal prefix usage quickly so that they can control usage of gender and number. As well, learners need to understand that the naming principle works differently in Mohawk than in English. Learners, of course, always ask the names of objects, qualities, and so on, and in English those names are nouns. Such nouns can always be invented in Mohawk, but often there is another more traditional form of reference, such as a mention of the object's function or state. For example, "refrigerator" might be "It keeps food cold," and "It's in the refrigerator," could just be "It's staying cold." We need to get students used to this kind of natural language usage. Perhaps we could do this by using prepared dialogues at first so that the language will be within the students' level, then by using tape recordings of speakers just talking and describing things. But one of the problems with fluent speakers "just talking" is that they go far beyond what students can handle in the initial stages. You have to coach them carefully and actually rehearse with them so that, when they make their tapes, they are using real language, but still talking in a way that beginners can understand. That has not yet been done in Mohawk.

The hard part for a fluent speaker is maintaining a beginner level without using stilted language or just teaching vocabulary. Unfortunately, for three decades, there has been an assumption that if you speak Mohawk, you can be a Mohawk language teacher. But teaching a language, especially one with so few speakers, takes a lot of skill and knowledge. Speaking fluently is not enough; you have to know how the language works and how people learn it. The teacher who has a good sense of what to do for the students can provide a step-by-step, pattern-by-pattern approach, which helps the students to understand what the teacher is doing and what language structures are being developed. Teachers who have learned the language as a second language themselves can often see where the difficulties are, but most fluent speakers are unaware of them. They

use language that seems simple to them, but has subtle complexities for learners. Even when responding to learners' questions, they may go far beyond the students' comprehension level.

When students learn specific patterns of how to put elements together, it greatly reduces the amount of language they have to learn. The old teaching method was to give specific phrases such as "I saw him," "He saw her," and "We saw the dog," and to make students learn them separately as individual pieces of information. That is a great deal of work, and it places a heavy burden on one's memory. But with patterning, students very quickly come to recognize the forms and can manipulate and alter them: "Oh, I know that pattern. I can put this word there." Then the teacher can introduce a new word, and the students can transform it grammatically, changing the pronominal prefix, putting it into the past, future, or conditional, using it with other words, and so on.

What are your plans for the next session?

We have reference materials available, and we need to spend time helping the students learn how to use them to increase their own vocabulary. We need to work on the sounds of the language in order to develop their audio sense so that they can master the phonology of the language. That way, they will not rely on the written forms when figuring out how they are going to say something. Then, once they are making the right sounds and have an oral base to hook the letter-sounds onto, we can introduce writing. Until now, we have introduced the written forms with the sounds, and the students have tended to treat the two as if they were inseparable, ignoring phonological rules that change pronunciations in different contexts. They need to use the writing system as they do in English, as a mnemonic device that simply reminds the reader of the correct sounds.

Another problem with introducing the spellings too soon has been that some students continue to read the letters and pronounce them as if they were English. For example, *K* in Mohawk is pronounced [k] or [g], depending on the context; the English pronunciation is irrelevant. Some of the students got so caught up in the spellings that they forgot that the letters did not represent English sounds. So after several months, they were still struggling with pronunciation, writing *A* and pronouncing English [ae], which does not exist in Mohawk. An initial period spent on the sound system and on some dialogues to introduce phonology should accustom them to hearing Mohawk. At the same time, it would introduce some strategies of language study such as memory work and oral practice where they have to listen and speak to others—strategies they can use with each other to focus more on the oral facets of the language.

As well, this coming year, we intend to spend much less time at the blackboard because, though the students may have learned whole chunks of the language academically, they did not hear it or use it in an active way. We hope to use a lot of dialogues to help them become proficient with the most commonly occurring forms. These dialogues provide structural models the students can use to express themselves, although they will still need to acquire a great deal of vocabulary, at least a thousand words.

What kinds of materials will be used?

The house should be covered floor to ceiling with all kinds of mnemonic devices, pictures, words, whatever will support learning. We also need to develop a variety of games and "play" materials to encourage oral practice and memory work and to develop graduated tapes that the students can use on their own. Some students have suggested a quiet study time in the afternoon when they could work individually; tapes would provide a way of doing self-directed and self-paced learning. Putting the theme dictionary on tape or CD-ROM would allow the students to access it on their own time, listen, and then do a vocabulary test. Stories on tape would be excellent, but the ones that are available are more for advanced or fluent speakers than for beginners. They are very complicated and hard to listen to because of the difficult vocabulary and complicated grammatical structures. For less experienced learners, one could record a short, simple version of a story, with accompanying pictures, told by a fluent speaker without using linguistic embellishments. Then a slightly more complex version with fewer pictures and some exercises could follow, and then the real story told in a traditional way.

Another activity students enjoy that we need to do more of is picture-based conversation, that is, looking at pictures and describing them. This is satisfying because the picture provides both meaning and context, and you can match the language to it: "There's the picture and this is the idea I'm trying to get across." We can look at the picture, and then at some detail, and then another and another, using the amount and kind of language for which the students are ready. And while doing that, we are using language that makes sense, that is, natural, communicative language. A similar resource is the picture story. The whole story is drawn on a series of acetates where each builds on and modifies the previous one, adding details or changing the meanings. In order to describe them, the students call upon more and more vocabulary. But these have not been developed yet, and the people who can do so are already working full time.

Are there special considerations about an Aboriginal language program that might be different from other immersion programs?

Initially, it is very important to have students in the program who are going to create an environment of success and accomplishment. That implies being highly selective at first so that, in the course of a few years, you create a cadre of fluent speakers who will affect the future of the language in a particular community. They will be the teachers, the ceremonial and cultural leaders, a resource for future learners. Then the language will become accessible to everyone in the community.

What developments are envisioned for the future?

This immersion program went from September until June, five days a week. That is a great deal of time in which to expect adults to deal with each other in the high-stress situations involved in language learning. One possibility in the future could be built-in rest periods, during which only a little language

maintenance would be required. For example, classes could be held three weeks out of four, or four out of five. For each period, goals would be set and practiced intensively so that students would gain both mastery and a sense of their own accomplishment, and each segment would show advancement over the previous one.

Another concern is the many people in the community who once spoke the language or whose parents and grandparents spoke it. They have "passive" comprehension, which means they can understand much of what they hear, but cannot speak the language. This is a group we would like to attract into the program because they have much of the language already and should profit from the immersion situation. Such people may become good language teachers in the future because, like the beginners, they will know the difficulties of language learning, but unlike them, they will develop fluency and pronunciation more quickly.

As well, the community would benefit from language development meetings with other communities. At these meetings, fluent speakers could develop vocabulary for non-traditional situations and compare vocabulary and usage from different Iroquois dialects or languages, forming new words where necessary. Gatherings for fluent speakers and learners who have completed the immersion program would help both to maintain and extend their language experience. The meetings would also help to overcome the language depletion that results from the lack of opportunity for practice. As students gained proficiency, they would participate more and more in such gatherings, strengthening the language and the community of speakers. This program is still evolving, but it has shown that adults can learn a language in an immersion setting, and we hope that other communities will adopt the model and adapt it to their own particular needs. It is one way to strengthen and restore Aboriginal languages as genuine communication systems within our many cultures.

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